

Shaping the War of Ideas in the Post-Iraq Era

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Introduction

"Weapons can kill people – *fatwas* can kill the ideology that motivates people."¹ The current struggle between the world and Muslim extremists comprises two battlefields: the physical and the ideological. While kinetic actions on the physical battlefield remain relevant, only through ideological warfare will the decisive battle be won. The cornerstone to waging ideological warfare is Information Operations (IO)²; however, current IO efforts are not aligned to properly exploit the current operating environment. In order to respond to an emerging shift in Muslim perceptions and ideologies in the post-Iraq era, US strategic information operations must evolve in terms of themes and dissemination methods.

Muslim Perceptions

For all the controversy and uncertainty surrounding the Iraq war over the last five years, it has ultimately served as a catalyst for many of the positive developments today. Bolstered by worldwide media coverage of al-Qaeda's brutal tactics, the image of Iraq has been transformed from the magnetic banner of jihad to the banner of death, defeat, and dishonor, sending a powerful message to the Muslim world and would-be jihadists.³

The defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq was a defining moment which exposed al-Qaeda's true ideology to the world and fueled a common debate among Muslims regarding moderate and extreme forms of Islam. What followed has profoundly shifted Muslim views from where they were even as

recently as 2007. According to the Pew Research Center, Muslims who were polled in the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, all report increased polarization and criticism of extremist influences between 2007 and 2008.⁴

More importantly, Pew has determined that support for al-Qaeda, bin-Laden, and terrorism has declined significantly among Muslims from 2006 to 2008. More specifically, "pro-Al Qaeda sentiment is now down to 10% in Saudi Arabia and has dropped from 70% to 4% in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan."⁵ Though the percentages vary by country polled and the nature of the questions asked, all polls indicate marked declines in the Muslim support and view of terrorism.

The resulting polarization between moderates and extremists is allowing a previously silent majority to have the courage to become outspoken. Suicide bombings are no longer in vogue, and attacks involving civilians are now more publicly denounced. As popular support for extremism diminishes within Muslim countries, so does al-Qaeda's support base they depend on for resources and the freedom to operate. Though much work remains, the same sentiment which served as a catalyst for al-Qaeda's defeat in Iraq is developing in other hotbed countries across the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

Emerging Ideological Shifts

As much of the violence from terrorist attacks has eroded popular support, an ideological shift within jihadist circles has also surfaced. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, known more commonly as Dr. Fadl, is the former leader of Al Jihad and is considered to be the spiritual

godfather to al-Qaeda. In May 2008, Dr. Fadl issued a ten-part treatise rejecting al-Qaeda's violence as a tactic for jihad. In one passage Fadl wrote, "We are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that."⁶ Given Dr. Fadl's background, his proclamation against acts of aggression is significant. According to Usama Ayub, former member of Egypt's radical Islamist community, Dr. Fadl's authoritative position has had a profound impact on the Muslim community.⁷

Other prominent figures from the world's *jihadist* circles likewise have defected from the al-Qaeda ideology and challenge the religious basis for violence. Sheik Salaman al-Oadah, a radical Saudi cleric formerly sympathetic to bin-Laden, recently decried on international television the innocents who had been killed in the name of al-Qaeda.⁸ Kamall Habib, a first generation Al-Jihad leader, has developed an audience of former radicals who also seek a path back to moderation.⁹ Reformed jihadist critics further include among others Karam Zuhdy, leader of the Islamic Group in Egypt (IG), and Noman Benotman, a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.¹⁰ These high-profile former jihadists lend significant credibility and prominence to the moderate movement.

The sum of these positive developments in both Muslim perceptions and jihadist attitudes should be considered monumental in the fight against radical Islam. The conditions which will lead Muslim masses to actively reject extremism are within reach if the informational environment can be exploited to maintain the momentum.

Current Information Operations

The concepts of ideological warfare and information operations (IO) are certainly not new, though they have gained significant emphasis within the military and government in recent years. Despite renewed emphasis and substantial resources, the ability of the United States to influence perceptions and the informational environment in today's world is marginal at best. Though shortcomings may persist exist in training, support structure, responsiveness, and other areas, the most significant deficiency is in understanding the *human terrain* in the Muslim world.

Current IO efforts often fail because themes are inappropriate, misdirected, and ineffectively disseminated. For example, traditional million-dollar commercials saturate Iraqi airwaves, yet fail to have resonance or relevance amongst the audience.¹¹ Additionally, the recent shifts within the Muslim community have not been exploited. Only through a fundamental shift in the current IO framework to address effective sources and relevant themes will operations succeed.

Refocused Information Operations

Ideology is the lifeblood of any terrorist organization or revolutionary movement. Without a resonating message which motivates or inspires, recruitment, funding, popular support, and other resources diminish. Once lost, the movement dies on the vine.¹² This ideological struggle is the decisive battle that must be fought, and only through effective and properly resourced information operations will the US succeed. The scope of this paper is not to prescribe

specific tasks, but rather to change the overall strategy of IO efforts. The two most important changes relate to themes and sources, i.e. the nature of the message, and who is delivering it.¹³

Today's informational environment demands the targeting of both moderate Muslims and extremists. Although a simplified interpretation, promoting the spread of moderate and tolerant Islam may be the most critical element to security for the West; it must be nurtured. Therefore, the focus must be in fostering conditions which drive a wedge between moderates and extremists.¹⁴ Ideally, such conditions would effectively discredit radicalism and serve to motivate moderates to no longer allow even tacit support to violent jihadist activities.

To date, the US expends most of its effort in promoting *its own* image and message. While an ideological struggle between the West and radical Islam exists, the message must focus not on this aspect, but rather on dividing the followers of radical and moderate Islam. Islamic extremism is often bred from a complex cocktail of social, environmental, and psychological factors, but it is still framed by religious contexts. By combining religious themes of moderateness and tolerance in a modern world with messages that challenge the religious underpinnings to jihad, the effect will sow doubt about the righteousness of violent jihad and thus erode key religious motivational factors.¹⁵

In addition to promoting moderateness, efforts must also work to discredit and dishonor extremism. Extremists have long been considered the minority fringe of the greater Muslim world; however, a

deafening silence has allowed this minority, in many ways, to hijack a religion. By aggressively pursuing a counter-propaganda campaign designed to expose extremist hypocrisy and religious failings, moderates and progressives can reinforce religious beliefs that are resistant to radical interpretations. No matter whether one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter, the body of evidence which can be used to bring shame to al-Qaeda is deep and must be exposed.

Equally as important as the theme is who is delivering it. The source of theme is critical to the perceived legitimacy and influence of any given piece of information. Sheiks, clerics, tribal leaders, and other Islamic authorities represent powerful sources of influence, and those whom share a common enemy with extremism must be the focus of any IO campaign. Creatively leveraging key media sources, public forums, and word-of-mouth channels will enhance the reach, audience, and authority of these individuals who challenge terrorism and violent jihad. As they seek to be heard, additional support and resources will serve to amplify their voices.

One controversial but critical requirement for success, however, is that all efforts must remain anonymous. Where the United States goes most wrong is in the execution of IO initiatives. The majority of these IO initiatives come directly from the US, and in most cases these efforts are disregarded, ineffective, or scorned by Muslim audiences. Even as late as December 2008, the Pentagon still ignores the importance of the source in its work to implement "influence websites", in local languages, to "shape the global media landscape."¹⁶ Planners will no doubt apply a thin veneer to their work, but these

half-measures are unlikely to disguise the websites origin or draw the appropriate audience. This approach will fail in terms of its legitimacy, its reach, and ultimately its influence because the source is deemed untrustworthy.

By leveraging surrogate individuals, activities, or organizations, IO objectives can be achieved while ensuring sufficient "distance" is maintained.¹⁷ Ideally, many of the local and regional voices would not know ultimately where support originated. This distance remains important because despite having a message aligned with US goals, the individuals themselves may remain at odds with US meddling. However, this is not without risk. The stakes are high and history is rife with fallout from using pawns and puppets. Still, by using multiple layers of international partners and organizations to insulate activities from perceived US influence can preserve anonymity while still providing the resources to amplify the voice of those who already promote congruent messages.

Consideration of Counterpoints

A myriad of counterpoints could be associated with these concepts in scope or in merit. One may argue that the evidence cited regarding a Muslim shift toward moderation is too insignificant or does not account for distinct local and regional differences. Indeed, the assertions are generalized. However, while they are in fact statistically represented in multiple regions, the most important aspect is that the evidence signifies emerging opportunities few would

have predicted just one year ago, and should be considered worthy of pursuit.

Another key counter argument may be that even a brilliant IO campaign will not address the pervasive undercurrent of rage by disaffected Muslim populations. The list of grievances within the Muslim world, both legitimate and perceived, is long. IO cannot directly solve many of the deep-seeded political and socio-economic problems which persist. However, IO measures when conducted effectively can influence how many of these conflicts are waged. In other words, change the rules for jihad. By changing the rules, the playing-field for counter-terrorism is leveled.

Cautionary Note

The intent of this paper is not to promote an overly positive perspective. Al-Qaeda remains tactically capable of executing attacks. There is no shortage of anti-Americanism abroad, nor terrorists to kill. Significant challenges persist in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Africa. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain a flashpoint for Muslims and will continue to attract extremists of all varieties. Regardless of any progress in promoting moderateness, Israel will no doubt be rationalized as an exception to the rules. The way ahead is complex and demands a broad spectrum of capabilities, but all efforts can be enhanced if conducted in concert with effective information operations.

Conclusion

September 11, 2001, brought the stark reality of radical Islam crashing down on the consciousness of the world. On September 12, when much of the Muslim world danced in the streets and bin-Laden became a household name, the challenges facing the U.S. seemed insurmountable. The physical battlefield remains filled with targets, and the war of ideas is far from over. However, indicators suggest that the war on terror may be at a tipping point if the informational environment can be exploited. Through fundamental changes to the current IO strategy, the initiative can be seized in the war of ideas and future battles can be transformed. (1,964 words)

¹ Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "Qaeda and the Tale of Two Battlespaces", October 1, 2008, *STRATFOR*, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20081001_al_qaeda_and_tale_two_battlespaces

² Information Operations is defined here broadly as strategic communication designed to influence and shape perceptions amongst foreign audiences.

³ Victor Davis Hanson, Ph.D., "In Defense of Liberty: The Relationship Between Security and Freedom", July 18, 2008, *The Heritage Foundation*, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/WorldwideFreedom/hl1093.cfm>

⁴ Richard Wike, "View from Pakistan: Before Bhutto's Assassination, Public Opinion Was Increasingly Opposed to Terrorism", Pew Global Attitudes Project, December 28, 2007, http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=32888

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within", June 2, 2008, *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/02/080602fa_fact_wright

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ Westminster Journal Online, "Al-Qaeda Lambasted by al-Qadah", January 6, 2008, <http://www.westminsterjournal.com/content/view/63/1>

⁹ Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within", June 2, 2008, *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/02/080602fa_fact_wright

¹⁰ Paul Cruickshank, "How Muslim extremists are turning on Osama Bin Laden", June 8, 2008, New York Daily News, http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2008/06/08/2008-06-08_how_muslim_extremists_are_turning_on_osa.html

¹¹ Andrew Garfield, "The US Counter-propaganda Failure in Iraq," Fall 2007, *The Middle East Quarterly*, <http://www.meforum.org/article/1753>

¹² Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, "Qaeda and the Tale of Two Battlespaces", October 1, 2008, *STRATFOR*, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20081001_al_qaeda_and_tale_two_battlespaces

¹³ J. Michael Waller, "A Sound Psychological Warfare Effort Emerges", March 19, 2008, *Political Warfare*,
http://jmw.typepad.com/political_warfare/2008/03/post.html

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Walter Pincus, "Defense Department Sustains Focus On 'War of Ideas' in Anti-Terrorism Efforts", December 1, 2008, *Washington Post*,
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/30/AR2008113001899_pf.html

¹⁷ J. Michael Waller, "A Sound Psychological Warfare Effort Emerges", March 19, 2008, *Political Warfare*,
http://jmw.typepad.com/political_warfare/2008/03/post.html